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ABSTRACT

Writing groups can use word processors or microcomputers in many different types of writing activities. Four hour-long sessions at a word processor with the help of a skilled word processing tutor have been found to be sufficient to provide a working knowledge of word processing. When two or three students enrolled in a writing class are assigned to a word processor or microcomputer, these machines can be valuable alternatives to typewriters, blackboards, or pen and paper. Word processors and microcomputers can be used to (1) help writers gain confidence, fluency, and enjoyment of written words and thereby overcome their blocks about writing "creatively" and (2) help students become aware of the style and structure of their writing. This booklet explains the procedures for conducting the following 10 different learning activities in writing groups: conducting one-sided phone conversations, maintaining a dialogue between external/internal voices, developing preparatory word lists, expanding a sentence, expanding a story, converting direct and indirect speech, converting first- and third-person narratives, paragraphing, and doing general editing and restructuring of written work. (MN)

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Using the word processor in writing groups

This article is for any writing groups who have access either to a word processor or to a microcomputer which can be used as a word processor but who don't use them because they are afraid of the technology involved, and are unsure whether word processors would be a help or a hindrance in their work. Josie Melia, from Friends Centre, Brighton, shares some ideas developed during an ALBSU Special Development Project.

What use could be made of word processors with writing groups?

At the Friends Centre, in Brighton, we have six BBC microcomputers which, with Wordwise or Wordwise Plus, can be used as word processors. We also have one printer which can be linked up to any of these machines.

My colleague Mary Boakes and I set out, as writing tutors and new technology novices, to discover how accessible these machines really are to us and our groups, and whether they could have any valuable application to the creative writing process.

It took us about four hour-long hands-on session at the machines, with the help of a tutor skilled in word processing, to learn the basic principles of how to key in text, edit it, put it onto disk and print it out. I can't say we felt entirely confident in our skills at this point, but it was very useful to be able to take away clear sets of instructions to refer to, reminding us which keys or combination of keys performed which functions, and which flick of a switch could wipe out the entire text, and we tried to build up our confidence by experimenting with pieces of writing on the machines on our own whenever we could.

Learning how to use the machines had already given us several ideas about how they could be used with writing groups, and we tried out these ideas ourselves on word processors before we introduced them to students.

We were not looking merely for exercises which would transfer well from pen and paper to word processors. We were trying to find ways in which the use of word processors could have a positive advantage for writing students, over the use of pen and paper, or typewriter or blackboard.

The students who came to use the machines divided roughly into two per machine, which we hoped would help each person to feel less nervous about using the technology. Mary and I also worked as a team with these groups in the hope that one of us might remember a vital switch or key that the other had forgotten when the (we feared) inevitable panic occured, in the absence of anyone skilled in word processing or computers.

The ideas we tried out could be divided roughly into two categories. One consisted of exercises to help writers gain confidence, fluency and enjoyment of written words, and overcome blocks about writing 'creatively' and the other was aimed at helping writers to be aware of the style and structure of their writing, and

Working with wordprocessors

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see that it's worth experimenting with alterations to a piece of writing.

The exercises we tried are as follows:

1. One-sided 'phone conversations

For this, a disk needs to be prepared which gives only one side of a telephone conversation. The same disk can be quickly loaded into each machine and students can then key in on the screen the words they imagine the other person might be saying in the conversation.

The advantage of performing this exercise on a word processor rather than on paper is that no spaces need to be left in the original one-sided text. When in 'Insert' mode (or its equivalent) any amount of new text can be keyed in, wherever the cursor is positioned. The text can thus expand indefinitely, with no false limits or messy spaces for the student to deal with.

This is an ideal sort of exercise to start with, as it is technically very simple.

After this, it should be possible for students to create these exercises for themselves. Each pair of students can key in an entire 'phone conversation between two people. This can then be stored on disk. Once safely stored, it can be recalled and one side of the conversation quickly and simply deleted. The pair working on this text then swap machines with another pair who have gone through the same process. Each pair of students then fills in the other half of the one-sided conversation created by the others.

These new two-sided conversations can be compared with the originals, which are still stored on disk, to see how far a change in one side of a conversation can alter its meaning.

2. External/Internal Voice

This exercise works on the same principle as the one above. Again, a disk needs to be prepared in advance. The text could be somebody telling the story of something that has happened to him (an accident, an apparently courageous act, etc) or it could be a thank you letter, a letter of application for a job, a door-to-door sales pitch, commentary on a solemn event or any other piece which allows for the person saying or writing it to be really thinking about something else.

When this text is loaded into the machines, 'Insert' mode is again used to key in the secret throughts of the person supposedly saying or writing the piece. This is technically just as simple as the above exercise, but requires the use of some symbol, such as brackets, to show where the internal voice begins and ends each time.

Both these exercises can be very humorous and enjoyable, and students can easily and instantly read each others work, to compare the differences made to the original texts.

3. Descriptions

Once more, a text needs to be prepared in advance and put on disk. The passage should be descriptive of a place, person or scene.

The purpose of the exercise, once the text has been loaded, is to alter the mood of the piece by changing words and phrases in the text. This can be done by a combination of overwriting, deletion and insertion, and leads to discussion of the types of words which are important in creating descriptions.

One-sided phone conversation

Example 1

Hi.

Hello Frank. How are you?

OK. A bit under the weather, though.

Hangover, eh? What time did you leave the party last night?

About 1.30, but I had to get up at seven.

Did you have a good time?

I wish I had.

I spent the evening talking to Anita.

Brilliant. Did you? I didn't know.

Yes, but unfortunately I had to take Caroline home at mid-night.

Oh, you didn't did you?

She was drunk as usual. Someone had to take her. Come to think of it, weren't you available at the time?

No, we'd gone out for a walk by then.

We? You and who was that?

Sheila.

Sheila? I didn't even know she was there.

Yes, didn't you see her?

I've been looking out for her for weeks.

You're useless sometimes.

Is she as nice as she looks?

I think so.

Could you introduce me to her some time?

Alright.

How about tonight.

No, I can't make it then.

Well, tomorrow after work then. See you there.

That's OK. Bye.

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Example 2

Hi.

Mum, how are you?

OK. A bit under the weather, though.

Did you manage to get to sleep in good time last night?

About 1.30, but I had to be up at seven.

You should have given yourself more time than that, mum.

I wish I had.

I managed to get you an appointment at the hairdresser's for tomorrow.

Brilliant. Did you? I didn't know.

I tried to ring you last night to let you know.

Oh, you didn't did you?

Yes, about half past eight, but you weren't in.

No we'd gone out for a walk by then.

Who did you go with?

Sheila.

Has she had her hair dyed yet?

Yes, didn't you see her?

So it must have been her who came into the shop this morning. I thought the face looked familiar.

You're useless sometimes.

Well, it looked very nice. Would you like to have your hair coloured too?

I think so.

Should I ask Russell to do it for you when he cuts it?

Alright.

I could see you for lunch afterwards then, couldn't I?

No, I can't make it then.

Well, I'll come round in the evening tomorrow then, alright mum?

That's OK. Bye.

4. Preparatory word-lists

When discussing a particular topic before writing about it, writing groups often find it useful to list on a blackboard any words and phrases suggested on the subject. Word processors can be valuable again here, as students can key in these words from the blackboard as soon as they are written up, and can use this list to experiment with before starting a piece of writing. Words can thus be expanded into phrases and sentences, nouns given appropriate adjectives, without any lengthy rewriting. This can help to overcome the fear of writing on an empty page at the start of a new piece, and any reluctance to jot down notes.

5. Expanding a sentence

This is a useful exercise for drawing attention to sentence structure and the functions of different parts of the sentence.

Students key in a simple sentence such as 'The man sat on the platform'. They are then asked to insert a word or two before 'man' to describe him. Next, they can put a word after 'sat' to describe how he sat. Then they can put in a group of words beginning with 'who . . .' after 'man', to say something more about the man. The exercise can obviously be expanded and adapted indefinitely with no unsightly crossings out.

Expanding a sentence

The man sat on the platform.

Example 1: The chauvinistic man sat on the platform.

Example 2: The seedy-looking man sat on the platform.

Example 3: The very smart man sat on the platform.

Example 4: The drunken man sat on the platform.

1. The chauvinistic man, who thought that all women were mad about him, sat on the platform.
2. The seedy-looking man who had upset her so much, sat on the platform.
3. The very smart man who had just had a long walk, sat on the platform.
4. The drunken man who had just left his wife, sat on the platform.

1. The chauvinistic man, who thought that all women were mad about him, sat disillusioned on the platform.
2. The seedy-looking man who had upset her so much, sat on the disused station platform.
3. The very smart man who had just had a long walk, sat wearily on the platform.
4. The drunken man who had just left his wife, sat desperate on the platform.

1. The chauvinistic man, who thought that all women were mad about him, sat disillusioned on the platform, and tried to think of a better approach.
2. The seedy-looking man who had upset her so much, sat on the disused station platform and seethed.
3. The very smart man who had just had a long walk, sat wearily on the platform and smoked a cigarette.
4. The drunken man who had just left his wife, sat desperate on the platform and thought about asking the people around him for money.

6. Expanding a Story

The next step to take, after the expanding sentence, is to the expanding story. A simple plot in a few stark sentences is prepared on disk and students can use the same principle as above, to expand the sentences again, and insert as many as they like in between, including dialogue, etc., until they have each created a unique story, with its own distinct characters and mood.

This exercise is very good for helping writers who are blocked, to free their imagination, as it takes away the responsibility of having to invent a story from scratch.

Expanding a story

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The man sat on the platform

His dog pricked up his ears at the sound of . . .

The sky was . . .

Should he or shouldn't he

It was a decision he had faced before

The station was crowded with people

His mind was made up.

Example 1

The chauvinistic man, who thought that all women were mad about him, sat disillusioned on the platform, and tried to think of a better approach. His tiny dog pricked up his ears at the sound of a woman's voice. The sky was bright and was inviting him to make the same mistake again with the approaching woman. Should he or shouldn't he make advances towards her was his question, since it was a decision he had faced before and the result had been an awful rejection. But he did it again and without subtleties he pestered her, with the result that the woman responded with a scream and suddenly the station was crowded with people. After this experience his mind was made up; approaching a woman like this only draws people's attention.

Example 2

The drunken man, who had just left his wife, sat desperate on the platform and thought about asking the people around him for money. His beautiful black dog pricked up its ears at the sound of an oncoming train. The sky was sharp and he was very cold, with no money for his train fare. Should he or shouldn't he beg for the money to get him out of this place before he changed his mind? It was a decision he had faced before, but not since he was a teenager. The station was crowded with people and he became very nervous because he had been living in an extremely quiet place for the last two years. His mind was made up; he would ask for help.

Example 3

The seedy-looking man who had upset her so much, sat on the disused station platform and seethed. His dog pricked up his ears at the sound of an empty crisp packet fluttering by. The sky was electric, threatening to burst. He knew the feeling. Should he or shouldn't he? It was a decision he had faced before, and never with great success. Why should he apologise? He felt angry with her, not apologetic. Why had they come here anyway, on this anniversary? Then he remembered the first time – the first argument, ten years ago, on this spot.

At that time, the station was crowded with people. Later, they had laughed at the way everyone ignored them as they threw their British Rail sandwiches at each other. It wasn't so funny at the time though. Her scalding coffee had hospitalised him.

The seedy-looking man looked up. His dog growled uncertainly. His mind was made up.

As he walked towards her, she poured a cup of tea from her flask, defiantly "Sorry," he mumbled.

She laughed generously and clutched his arm.

"Happy Anniversary, honey," she said.

7. Direct/Indirect Speech

The aim of this exercise is to focus on the words and punctuation which need to be altered when changing from direct to indirect speech, or vice versa.

A disk can be made of a set of sentences such as 'He said, "I won't come here again".' Fairly simple sentences should be used, without splitting any quoted words. These can then be changed to indirect speech by deleting quotation marks and altering the rest of the sentence accordingly. Similar exercises can be devised for indirect to direct speech.

The advantage of doing this sort of exercise on a word processor is that the only parts of the sentence which have to be dealt with are the ones indicating direct or indirect speech, so the process is less laborious and more easily memorable.

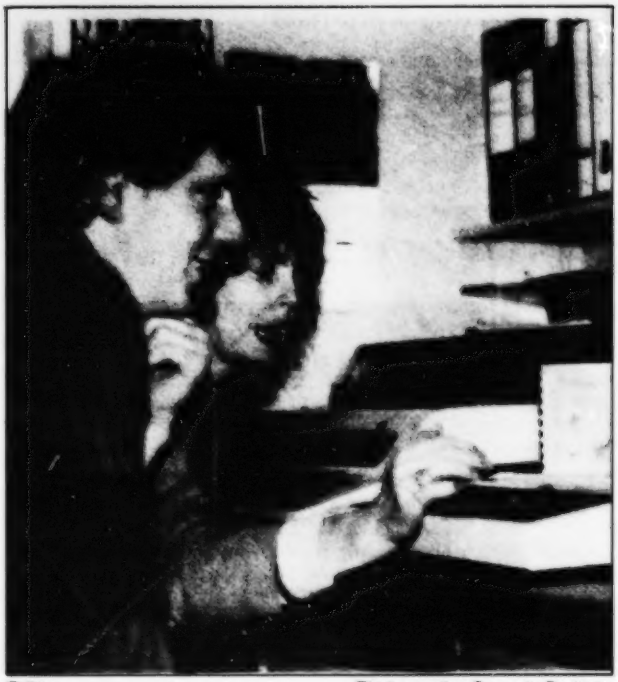
8. First person/Third person narrative

This exercise works on the same principle. A continuous prose passage written in the first person, is prepared on disk. Students change this to the third person by altering all the relevant words. Depending on the length of the passage, some of these alteratioins could be made using the 'Search and Replace' option on the menu, (or its equivalent) which will again help to focus on which words actually make the difference. This can also be done the other way round, for third to first person narrative.

9. Paragraphing

Paragraphing exercises can take the form of the exercises in 6 where a topic sentence is expanded into a paragraph.

Another way of approaching the subject is to create on disk a number of paragraphs in which the sentences are not in the order which makes most sense. These sentences can be re-arranged on the word-processor into the most logical order. The technique used to lift out sentences and place them elsewhere like this, will not have been necessary in any of the preceding exercises, but once students (and tutors) have gained some confidence with word processors the technique should not prove too difficult.



Editing *Photographs: Sean de Podesta*

10. General editing and re-structuring of written work

Clearly, word processors can be of enormous value to the editing process, as words and phrases can be deleted, altered and added to without any mess or laborious re-writing. The paragraphing techniques mentioned in 8 can be extended to whole pieces of writing, and students can re-arrange and re-write passages, change from first to third person, direct to indirect speech, etc., without embarking each time on a rewriting of the entire piece.

Students can work jointly on the editing of each other's writing, or exchange pieces for mutual editing. It thus becomes easier to attain a critical distance from recently written work, and much easier to rework and experiment with it.

It is worth taking the precautionary measure of putting each piece of writing on disk *before* editing in case too much text is accidentally deleted. Work can in fact be stored on disk at each stage of any of these exercises, so that the process of altering work can be clearly seen when all the stages are recalled.

One of the other obvious advantages of using word processors is the use of the printer. Students can take away edited, printed copies of their work as soon as it is finished, and as many copies as necessary can be made.

The benefits we found, in using word processors could be summed up as follows:

1. Immediate, cheap, printed copies of writing can be made.
2. Work is legible and neat at all stages of writing.
3. Students can work jointly very easily on many of the processes.
4. Editing and reworking written pieces is much easier and more enjoyable, and all the stages of it can be clearly seen and compared.
5. Word processors can help to free 'writer's block'.
6. Using word processors gives students and tutors an extra skill if they have not previously used them.

Our confidence, as a group, in the technology developed quite rapidly and we didn't have too many catastrophes. The ideas we developed take time to prepare and are only a beginning, but the whole exercise has been an interesting and enjoyable one, and has inspired us to continue using word processors with future writing groups.

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